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ARTICLE

There Can Be No Successful Logical Argument from Evil

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Abstract

Brian Leftow's observation that the logical problem of evil is largely resolved, mainly due to the success of free-will defenses, is not universally accepted.[1] Graham Oppy, for instance, acknowledges the current shortcomings in formulating a logical argument from evil but contends that deeming such efforts futile is premature.[2] Likewise, James Sterba's recent work shows continued attempts to develop this argument.[3] These views prompt a critical question: Is constructing a successful logical argument from evil futile, or will persistence yield success as it has in other philosophical inquiries?

This article introduces the 'Layers of Reality Response' to the logical problem of evil, aiming to conclusively resolve the debate for classical theists, independent of free-will defenses. This response establishes two points:

1. Common linking principles in logical arguments from evil are not evidently true and fail to apply across different layers of reality.
2. There is no non-question-begging linking principle for proponents of the logical argument from evil, making a successful formulation inherently unachievable.

If correct, this renders the logical argument from evil not just a philosophical failure but an argument that cannot, in principle, be successfully reformulated – it is not only dead but 'unresurrectable'.

Keywords: classical theism; grounding; metaphysical dependence; problem of evil; theodicy

[1]Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2]Graham Oppy, 'Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defences', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. by Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 45–46.

[3]Our argument is aimed at two groups: first, those actively advancing a logical problem of evil, such as Sterba, and second, those, such as Oppy, who, while unconvinced by existing formulations, remain open to the possibility of a successful one emerging. In other words, we seek to demonstrate not only why current formulations fail but also why no future formulation can ultimately succeed.

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1. Introduction

The logical argument often contends that the following three statements are inconsistent:

1. There is evil in the world.
2. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good.
3. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good, there would be no evil in the world.

Out of this inconsistency, a logical argument from evil can be devised that features three distinct kind of premises, as Graham Oppy points out: a datum premise, which articulates negative states of affairs, a characterization premise, which specifies our understanding of God (generally, as omni-attributed, like the above), and a linking premise, which pronounces the (often moral) principle that enables the inference of attributing failure on part of the God on the basis of certain negative states of affairs that God presumably could have prevented.[4] If God is a perfect being, then failure cannot be attributed to Him. A perfect being that is at once imperfect involves a contradiction, so if the inference from negative states of affairs is legitimate, it would imply the non-existence of God. The inference is not legitimate – nor can it ever be – for reasons this article aims to explain, building upon a line of thought present, though not always explicit, among classical theists (namely, that God is not a cause in the same way other things are causes).[5] The fundamental issue is that no non-question-begging moral principle can warrant the implication found in (3), since these occurrences exist

[4]Graham Oppy, 'Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defences', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. by Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 45–46.

[5]Specifically, our work seeks to advance an idea introduced by James Ross in *Philosophical Theology (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969)* that has not received sufficient attention – namely, how the distinction between God's metaphysical causality and creaturely causality undermines traditional arguments from evil. Ross initially suggested that inferences about divine responsibility for evil should be restricted when metaphysical dependence is at play. We build upon this by clarifying his principle of limited inferences, strengthening his argument by answering unanswered questions or filling obvious gaps, and addressing objections he left unexplored. Additionally, we refine Ross's approach by dropping certain examples he used that, in our view, weaken his case and are ultimately unnecessary. Another paper that might seem related to ours is Samuel Lebens' *God and His Imaginary Friends*. However, several key differences set our approach apart. We do not argue that creation is God's dream or fictional story, nor do we rely on analogy. Rather, we show inductively that moral principles required for a logical problem of evil fail when applied across ontological levels.

Moreover, Lebens' first theodicy suggests God lacks full control over creation, like a dreamer over their dreams – an idea we reject as incompatible with Classical Theism. His second, treating history as God's fictional story, is also distinct from our view. We do not consider creation fictional but rather as existing at an ontologically different level of reality, yet (we would suggest) as related to God in a *sui generis* way.

While analogies such as dreamers and dreams can illustrate how moral principles break down across ontological layers, they do not define the God–world relation. Instead, we maintain that once creation's distinct ontological status is fully appreciated, no moral linking principle can sustain a logical problem of evil. Such principles either fail inductively or beg the question, as we aim to show. Samuel Lebens, 'God and His Imaginary Friends: A Hassidic Metaphysics'. *Religious Studies*, 51(2) (2015), 183–204. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412514000298.

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at different levels of reality. No moral principle, however plausibly binding across the horizontal dimension of reality (i.e., among entities on the same plane of reality), can be assumed to apply 'vertically' (i.e., between entities interacting across different layers or planes of reality).

As will be shown, all moral linking principles manifestly breakdown within the few relevant examples we have of when one tries to apply them across layers of reality, which provides inductive grounds for their rejection as absolute or universal (again, even if objective between entities on the same layer of reality). To avoid breakdown across layers of reality, the only option remaining for the proponent of the logical argument from evil is to recast the principle in such a way that it simply restates – rather than links to – the conclusion that the proponent is hoping to establish, which is hardly adequate as it merely begs the question. Hence, there is not only not a currently successful logical argument from evil but there cannot ever be one. It is not only dead, as many philosophers have already pronounced, but 'unresurrectable'.

2. Preliminaries

Before developing our argument, it's important to note that the logical problem of evil must be framed as an *internal critique* to be effective. To illustrate what this involves, consider a common (though flawed) response sometimes offered by theists when atheists raise the problem of evil:

'To even speak of something being evil already implies the existence of God. After all, if God doesn't exist, nothing can be either good or bad, so by pressing the problem of evil, you've inadvertently become a theist. Congratulations!'

This is, admittedly, a cartoonish version of the argument, but even in its less exaggerated forms, it remains problematic, primarily because they treat an internal critique from the atheist as an external critique in which moral realism is not just an assumption for the sake of the argument. Aside from the controversial assumption that moral realism depends on theism, this response misses the point: the problem of evil is meant as an internal critique. Even if the atheist is a moral anti-realist, they still have the right to point out an inconsistency within the theist's commitments. What matters here is whether the theist's commitments are internally consistent, not whether the atheist's commitments align with their own worldview.

That said, it's equally important to emphasize that an internal critique works both ways. The atheist cannot press the problem of evil by assuming things the theist does not accept – such as a different axiology. Running a problem of evil argument from a hedonic utilitarian perspective might work against some theists (perhaps?), but it won't work against classical theists, who reject such a theory. The key point is this: just as the theist cannot dismiss the problem of evil by claiming the assumptions required to run it are inconsistent with atheism, the atheist cannot raise the problem of evil by ignoring the commitments of the theistic view they are critiquing.

To further illustrate, we might emphasize one assumption already highlighted by classical theists in response to the problem of evil: that God is not a moral agent in the same way humans are moral agents. (We won't focus on defending this argument here, but it's worth noting in evaluating an internal critique, as our strategy follows a similar structure in offering an in-principle reason – internal to classical theism – for why no logical argument from evil can succeed.)

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In short, classical theists are committed to a theory that goodness is equivalent to being, under the aspect of desirability or perfection.[6] For example, we naturally consider a tree with deep roots, strong branches, and vibrant leaves as a good tree – better than one that fails to achieve these things. Badness (or evil, broadly) is understood by classical theists as a privation of goodness, and this concept extends to their moral theory.

In the context of morality, these ideas apply to rational agents capable of contingent self-determination. Such agents can consider reasons for action, including facts about human nature, and either will to promote their flourishing or thwart it. The former is a rational, morally good act; the latter is an irrational, morally bad act. Humans are perfected to the extent that they act rationally, since rationality is their species-specific potency. It is what separates humans from other animals and makes them fully human.

Now, here is the key point internal to classical theism: moral obligations – for humans, at least – stem from human nature, and God is not a human being. He does not possess a human nature, as God is an immaterial, purely actual being, with no potentials to fulfill or higher state to attain. For classical theists, God simply is, always and fully actual.

Fr Brian Davies argues that these points render the (logical) problem of evil ineffective.[7] He claims that the problem of evil arises from a fundamental confusion of categories – namely, between creature and creator. To apply moral requirements that pertain to human beings to God – even if classical theists agree with those requirements for humans – introduces an assumption that classical theists have every right to reject. Those moral requirements apply only to beings with human nature, which God essentially lacks. For this reason, Davies and others argue that the problem of evil, when directed against classical theism, is dead on arrival.

Again, we are not defending Davies's approach here – several notable classical theists disagree with Davies – but illustrating what is meant by an internal critique. If – *if, if, if*! – Davies is correct in his 'God is not a moral agent' claim, then an internal critique of classical theism cannot succeed by imposing moral requirements applicable to human beings onto God. Insisting otherwise would beg the question. On the other hand, if one holds a non-classical theistic perspective – where God is seen as subject to similar moral obligations as humans – then the problem of evil might still be available to the skeptic. This could be because the non-classical theist doesn't view God as fundamentally different from humans, or because they adhere to a different ethical theory, perhaps one where moral obligations are not just objective but absolute. In such cases, these theists would need to offer a theodicy or justification for why God is not morally defective in allowing negative states of affairs.

With the idea of an internal critique now (hopefully) clarified, we aim to further defend classical theism from logical problems of evil by highlighting another feature inherent to the classical theistic paradigm: layers of reality.

[6]For a recent defense of this thesis, see Gaven Kerr, 'Goodness and Being, Transcendentals, Participation', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. by Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 85–106.

[7]Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

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Our primary contention is this: the inferences we can legitimately make across layers of reality – i.e., what we can infer about one layer of reality based on what occurs in another – are extremely limited, particularly in the moral realm. In fact, we argue that no inference can be made about the moral status of God (at the fundamental level of reality) based on negative states of affairs at less fundamental levels of reality, even if one assumes (contrary to classical theists) that God is a moral agent like us. This blocks any possibility of running a successful logical argument from evil because, to make the argument work, the skeptic would have to assume either that God exists on the same level of reality as humans (an assumption classical theists emphatically reject) or introduce a linking premise in the argument that is question-begging, as we aim to show.

3. Initial statement of the layers of reality response

We mentioned that classical theists are committed to layers of reality. But what does this mean?

Simply put: Some layer of reality is *less fundamental* if entities in that layer could not exist unless some entity or collection of entities of a *more fundamental* layer exist and *produce* and *sustain* the existence of the less fundamental entities and whatever properties they have. This understanding quickly gives rise to the notion of *metaphysical causation*, or deep dependence, as grounding theorists sometimes call it, which is simply the relation the less fundamental reality bears to the more fundamental reality producing and conserving all its beings, which would include all its properties. For example, with Tolkien actively thinking up his story, the story and all its features exist, and really exist,[8] but only insofar as Tolkien is thinking it up. To clarify, we are not speaking of books that symbolically convey the story, but the story *per se*. Apart from the activity of Tolkien's imagining mind, there is nothing imagined.[9]

Now, we ask: what can be inferred across these layers of reality, that is, between less and more fundamental layers related as (metaphysical) effect to cause? For instance, what can we infer about Tolkien from the story he is currently imagining? (Here, we take Tolkien and his imagined story as examples of different layers of reality.) Let's say, for familiarity's sake, that the story is *The Lord of the Rings*. There are certainly some things we can infer. For example, we can infer that Tolkien exists. Clearly, the less fundamental reality – the imagined *Lord of the Rings* – could not exist without the existence of the imagining mind that grounds it.

What else can we infer? It's harder to say. There are obviously many things we cannot infer. For instance, from the fact that there are orcs in Tolkien's story, we cannot reasonably infer that Tolkien himself is an orc – at least not with any confidence. Why

[8]Although in common parlance 'fictional' is treated as synonymous with 'unreal', we contend that a more accurate framework is to consider 'fictional' as less fundamental, i.e., existing in a mode that is dependent on limited minds. It is wrong to say, for instance, that Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist, or that there isn't really a Sherlock Holmes. Rather, Sherlock Holmes really is the fictional character of Arthur Conan Doyle's novels.

[9]We mean there is no story as being imagined by Tolkien without Tolkien actively, simultaneously imagining it. This ignores the issue of Tolkien setting his story down on some medium, such as paper, which preserves in potency a certain range of meaning which can later be actualized by other readers who understand enough of the content and language.

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can we infer Tolkien's existence but not his 'orc-ness', even though both features exist in the less fundamental reality? The reason is simple: we can infer Tolkien's existence because it is impossible for the less fundamental layer of reality to exist without the more fundamental layer also existing. This makes the inference legitimate. However, there is no similar logical connection that allows us to infer that Tolkien is an orc simply because he imagines orcs. It's entirely possible for him to imagine orcs without being one himself.

Thus, we can infer certain things (features, broadly) about the more fundamental reality from the less fundamental reality if it's impossible for the latter to have those features without the former also having them. Otherwise, we would need inductive support – that is, independent examples where, in similar cases, the more fundamental reality shares a feature when the less fundamental reality has it. But we have no inductive evidence suggesting that stories featuring orcs are typically imagined by orcs. This line of reasoning does not support the 'orc-thesis'.

With that informal statement out of the way, let us, following James Ross, introduce what we will call the *rule of restricted inferences between layers of reality*:

> If A and B are realities such that A is less fundamental than B and where A is metaphysically caused by B, then we can infer properties of B from A only under specific conditions.
>
> Conditions:
>
> - It is logically impossible for A to have some feature F if B does not have F.
> - Inductive evidence supports that feature F in A implies F in B based on other known instances of metaphysical dependence.

Now, let us ask a question that brings us closer to the problem of evil. *The Lord of the Rings* contains many negative states of affairs – many atrocious evils. Can we infer from these features anything about Tolkien, particularly that he is somehow defective for creating a world with such negative states or for failing to prevent them, especially when he could have easily done so at no cost to himself? The answer is confidently no. We cannot infer any such thing about Tolkien based on his imagining of *The Lord of the Rings*.

So, we can infer the existence of an imagining mind from the existence of an imagined story because the story could not exist unless the more fundamental reality – the imagining mind – existed to conceive it. However, beyond this, many other inferences – especially moral ones – are not so straightforward. For instance, it is not legitimate to infer moral failure in the more fundamental reality simply because moral failure (or defect of some kind) exists in the less fundamental reality that depends on it. Such inferences violate the Rule of Restricted Inferences, as we will demonstrate.

Thus, once it is clear that God does not relate to the world in the same way that things within the world often (but not always) relate to each other – that is, once we understand that God is the deep metaphysical cause of the world, producing and sustaining it in existence – and once the rule of limited inferences is understood, the logical argument from evil loses its force.

Let us now substantiate this.

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4. The layers of reality response, developed

That there are layers of reality is, we contend, obvious, but more importantly it is a critical traditional component of the classical theistic worldview, since theists have long claimed that God transcends the physical world, occupying the absolute basement of reality as the necessary condition for any finite, contingent thing. As we emphasized earlier, if a logical argument is to succeed, it must show some inconsistency between the components *internal* to the classically theistic worldview themselves or between those commitments and some obvious fact of the world – like the fact of evil's occurrence.[10] Contemporary work in grounding theory lends strong support the notion of a hierarchical, or layered, structure to reality, as does common sense when considering things like imaginers and what they imagine, dreamers and what they dream, or even just how a waltz is metaphysically dependent upon the people waltzing.[11] So, the skeptic will not have available to them the ability to deny this commitment without begging the issue by simply asserting or assuming a flattened view of reality that theists (and many non-theists) would reject.

With that in mind, let us now return to our example of entities at different level of reality and ask some questions about their relationship. Consider once again Tolkien and his story – once more, say aspects of what would eventually become *The Lord of the Rings*. As Tolkien is imagining different scenes of his story, including characters suffering greatly and committing various heinous crimes, what might be inferred of Tolkien? From the story alone, very little and certainly not something that will help the proponent of the logical argument from evil. To clarify, it may be possible for us to infer something of the character of the author based *on the sort of narrative* he composes, for which it is worth mentioning that such compositions are on the same layer of reality as the author, but not based *on the sort of world* he imaginatively builds (this is a point we'll return to later).

To clarify, we are *not* claiming we are characters in God's story, or anything like that. We are not fictions. We are appealing to an *example* of different layers of reality showcasing the rule of restricted inferences, where it is obvious that we cannot infer the feature of failure or defect (with respect to moral character or otherwise) of the more fundamental reality from the observance of failure or defect from the less fundamental reality metaphysically dependent upon it.

[10]This point is highly relevant to our forthcoming consideration of moral principles, since any linking premise deployed in a logical argument must select a moral principle that the classical theist is himself committed to. Why so? Because, to be frank, what other option is there? Ethical principles are, as everyone knows, matters of considerable controversial, and (*pace* certain Kantians) none of them are analytic, and there are many moral anti-realists to boot. So, absent a moral principle that is analytic, the linking premise must involve some objective moral principle already internal to the classical theistic worldview, which is to say, some principle the classical theist already accepts or should accept as a consequence of *their* theory (see note 1). Urging some other principle that the classical theist is definitely not committed to – say, some consequentialist principle ('the greatest good for the greatest number', say) – is not going to serve the project, since the theist can simply reject that principle outright, no matter how committed the objector may personally be to it. Put simply, we are concerned with the problem of evil as an internal world-view critique.

[11]For a helpful overview, see Patrick Flynn and Enric F. Gel, 'Is Grounding Essentially Ordered Causation?' *The Review of Metaphysics,* 77(2) (2023), 247–273. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/915461.

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At this point, we invite the reader to take any of the moral principles proposed by proponents of arguments from evil – Mackie's or Sterba's, etc. – and test them in the current case. The result is one of obvious breakdown.

For instance, let us briefly inspect James Sterba's formulation with his attempted deployment of the Pauline Principle – namely, that one may not do evil that good may come of it.[12] To be precise, Sterba does not think the Pauline Principle itself actually is inviolable (he takes it that one may intentionally lie to save a life, for example), but he believes certain components of it are inviolable, which he labels Moral Evil Prevention Requirements. They are:

1) Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done.
2) Do not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.
3) Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

But these requirements fail to produce the result Sterba is looking for once we consider entities relating at different orders of reality, since, to return to our example, we cannot infer anything about Tolkien's moral character by his creating a world in which negative states of affairs occur (horrendous or otherwise) that he could easily have avoided among (admittedly imaginary – we'll come back to this later) rational beings, *regardless* of whether he was intending certain goods to come out of it, such as a more exciting story or particulargoods (logically dependent or otherwise) to individual entities. All to say, even if we think the Pauline Principle is true, as something with binding force among beings on the same layer of reality, it is quite clear that it does not apply vertically, that is, when trying to relate beings at different layers of reality. It does not enable the sort of inference Sterba or other proponents of the logical argument from evil require to strongly refute the existence of God. Minimally, these cases of entities relating at different layers of reality should cause us to restrict our commitment to said principles, such that, even if they are *objective* (viz., have stance-independent force among entities of the same natural kind or the same layer of reality or both, say), they are not obviously *absolute* (applicable between all beings, including at different layers of reality or different kinds even).

We anticipate, of course, the obvious retort that we are currently containing an example comprised of imaginary as opposed to real beings like us. This objection will be dealt with later, because it importantly sets up for our primary contention of there

[12]James P. Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). See also Sterba, ed., 'Is the God of Traditional Theism Logically Compatible with All the Evil in the World?' *Religions,* 11(5) (2020), Special Issue. <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/god_compatible_evil> [Accessed 10 April 2024].

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being no way to issue a linking principle that applies vertically without begging the question and no way to apply the linking principle horizontally without flattening the God of Classical Theism into some anthropomorphic superman on our ontological plane. With that promissory note issued, we now continue with developing the previous line of thought.

Briefly, we might also wish to consider Mackie's proposed linking premise in his logical argument from evil, namely, 'that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do'.[13]

Though temping, we must continue to set aside wider aspects of the debate, including the (non-insignificant) fact that many have challenged Mackie's principle both with respect to the idea that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can (since there may be justifying goods that are logically dependent upon the permission of negative states of affairs) and that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do (an omnipotent being cannot bring about logically dependent goods without that which those goods are dependent upon, for example). None of that is our concern; rather, we are concerned with what sort of inferences this principle might legitimately enable.[14] Just ask: can we infer that Tolkien is not good because he did not eliminate all the evil in his story, though it would have been enormously easy for him to do so? Obviously not, and this is not merely because the evil is fictional, as we will discuss later.

With Sterba's and Mackie's proposals having been considered, and toward the end of continuing our discussion efficiently, we shall avoid independently testing other principles from the literature on this subject (though, again, we invite the reader to do this themselves; the results are returned rather quickly and decisively, we submit).[15] Instead, we simply offer what we consider the most plausible generalized linking premise for the logical problem of evil. While this principle will (spoiler alert!) breakdown as well, it will allow us to see how the modification necessary to get the logical argument from evil to run inevitably leads to begging the issue. Our principle, somewhat similar to one of Sterba's Requirements, says this:

> If one is in a position to prevent the suffering or sin of some other being, without incurring some cost clearly worse, they should do so. Otherwise, they are morally at fault.

This principle is definitely plausible but *only* when considering entities and their relations on the same level of reality, since this principle, like the others, clearly breaks

[13]J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind,* 64 (1955), 200–201. While Mackie abandoned the logical problem of evil in his later work, he leaned toward the evidential version in *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[14]Graham Oppy, for example, is one such atheist who challenges Mackie's principle. Graham Oppy, 'Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defences', 45–46.

[15]We acknowledge that Mackie appears to have abandoned his own version of the logical problem of evil in his later work. Nevertheless, we find his formulation useful in illustrating our central point. Sterba, by contrast, has not only maintained his commitment to the logical problem of evil but has continually refined and defended it against criticisms. His work has even led to a dedicated special issue on the topic. See James P. Sterba, ed., *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?* Special issue, *Religions,* 12(4) (2021), https://mdpi.com/books/reprint/8645-do-we-now-have-a-logical-argument-from-evil.

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down when thinking of the relation between entities on different layers of reality, i.e., Tolkien and his story.[16]

Now, consider that most would accept (as they should accept) that if some passerby can save a child from drowning, with no obvious cost such as failing to prevent something worse, they should do so. If they failed to act to prevent the child's death in such a situation, we would consider them to be morally at fault. Same with many of the other principles offered by formulations of the logical argument – that is, we should accept said principles as binding upon us in relation to other (presumably rational) beings on the same plane of reality.

But again, this principle is not applicable when concerning entities at different layers of reality; the principle, in fact, obviously does *not* apply in the most relevant respect, that is, insofar as it allows one to make any justifiable moral inference about the more fundamental level from the less fundamental layer. For Tolkien, highly plausibly, could have precluded all the suffering and sin of his characters without cost and yet we do not find him morally defective or blameworthy for failing to do so.[17]

We take it that the matter, as so far stated, is quite uncontroversial. If that is correct, then to salvage the logical argument from evil, the skeptic must modify the principle to avoid breakdown when attempting to apply it across different layers of reality.

Can this be done? Perhaps the following alteration will do the trick.

> If some being who is the metaphysical cause of some other being (and thus at a different level of reality) is in a position to prevent the suffering or sin of that other being without incurring some cost clearly worse, they should do so. Otherwise, they are morally at fault.

While this principle addresses the issue of different layers of reality, it is no more evidently true than the previous version. Simply adjusting the principle to account for relations between entities on different levels of reality does not salvage the logical argument from evil, as the same reasons for rejecting the previous iteration apply here as well. Specifically, Tolkien, as the metaphysical cause of the beings in his story, is not morally at fault for failing to prevent the suffering and wrongdoing imagined to occur within the world. This leaves one remaining option, which undoubtedly is the most obvious option. That is, to qualify the principle to cover only real (as opposed to fictional or imaginary) beings.

This would mean proposing something as follows:

[16]Note that the principle necessarily entails, for instance, that the moral character of a creator is dependent on his creation. Now, we will consider a way in which Tolkien's moral character is plausibly dependent on his creation, but not *qua* creator but *qua* voyeur of his creation. As the God of classical theism cannot attend to creation voyeuristically, we argue that this aspect of moral contingency simply does not apply to God.

[17]We should mention that this result is so far unsurprising from within the classical theistic paradigm. After all, within classical theism – certainly the classical theism held by thinkers like Thomas Aquinas – the moral law is something attendant upon human nature. From human nature and its inherent ends do our moral obligations flow. God does not have a human nature and has no end beyond himself required for his perfection. Thus, God does not have moral obligations, nor can it be sensibly said that God has virtues (or vices). More on this in a moment. Also, see Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil.*

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> If some being who is the metaphysical cause of some other real being (not fictional or imaginary) is in a position to prevent the suffering or sin of that other real being without incurring some cost clearly worse, they should do so. Otherwise, they are morally at fault.

The advance of this principle is that it does initially propose what might appear like a relevant difference to avoid the breakdown that occurred with the prior alteration. However, this modification will not – in fact, cannot – succeed either. Several points are in order to explain why.

First, restricting it misses the general point that moral principles governing entities on the same layer of reality do not obviously apply when relating entities at different layers. In fact, they seem clearly inapplicable in the best examples we have concerning different layers of reality, such as the mind-story or dreamer-dreamed analogy (Socrates and his singleton might be another example of different layers, and since there is no moral relationship between them, this may further corroborate our point). The skeptic's burden is to justify why moral principles that apply to entities on the same layer of reality should automatically extend to relationships between different layers of reality. Without this justification, simply asserting that God is morally at fault for not preventing suffering is equivalent to the conclusion the skeptic hopes to establish.

Moreover, by closing off fictional or imaginary examples, the skeptic also closes off all possible inductive evidence that could support their case. If they cannot build an inductive case for the required inference, they must show it is logically impossible for a less fundamental reality to have some relevant feature (such as defectiveness) if the more fundamental reality does not. But this claim will not hold, as it merely asserts that a perfect being cannot create an imperfect world, which is logically equivalent to the conclusion the skeptic is trying to establish. This is question-begging in the most straightforward sense.

Ultimately, and most importantly, the restriction itself is question-begging, and flagrantly so.

Why is this? Simply because the only possible *instance* of the restricted principle is the situation of God and the world, since *only God* – within the classical theistic paradigm – can create *real beings such as us*.[18] Hence, the restricted principle is just

[18]One might wonder whether the key moral difference is phenomenal consciousness – that it is precisely the possession of phenomenal consciousness (which fictional beings presumably lack) that makes the problem of evil a genuine issue. However, we maintain that this is, at best, a partial restatement of the objection we are addressing – namely, that the entities we have considered so far are fictional (or imaginary) rather than real. While the presence or absence of phenomenal consciousness is one factor distinguishing fictional from real beings, it is not the only one.

To be more precise: By swapping *real beings* for *beings with phenomenal consciousness*, the skeptic has not introduced a fundamentally new case – they have merely narrowed their principle to a subset of the same reality. But this does nothing to avoid the original problem because the principle still only applies to God and creation.

Since the principle ('If some being who is the metaphysical cause of some other being with phenomenal consciousness is in a position to prevent the suffering or sin of that other phenomenally conscious being without incurring some cost clearly worse, they should do so. Otherwise, they are morally at fault'), when reformulated to focus on beings with phenomenal consciousness rather than real beings, still has no other

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the same as saying: If God, or the being that grounds reality and has the capacity to prevent some aspect of reality from coming to be, i.e. has will or agency, fails to prevent the suffering and sin of real beings metaphysically dependent upon him when He could have done so without cost, God is morally defective. This means the principle used to support this claim *is just a restatement of it*. To thus insist that the principle is the premise in an argument to establish this conclusion (when it is merely a restatement) is false.[19]

This means the restricted principle fails to advance the problem of evil unless one can somehow show the restricted principle is true from experience. This, however, would be impossible unless, of course, God revealed it, because the only experience relevant to the principle is the one of God creating real beings. So, God would have to tell us the restricted principle is true, because, presumably, God is the only one in such a position to know, since all other examples concerning non-real beings imply the opposite. However, even if this were revealed by God, it would show, ironically, that God is defective and not someone to be trusted (i.e., that this someone just isn't God, in other words, and so we would have grounds for being highly suspect that what we were dealing with was, in fact, *divine* revelation). So, we would have no grounds for accepting as true this purported revelation as it would be a self-defeating purported revelation.[20] It thus seems there is no way to know whether this principle is true even if it were true. This, atop of the inductive grounds from other examples of more and less fundamental realities for supposing it to be false.

This shows that the stronger form problem of evil is not only not successful but cannot possibly be made successful.[21]

Let us now consider some objections.

5. The wholesomeness objection

To finish, we defuse several concerns that we expect our argument to raise. Doing so should allow us to clarify (and hopefully strengthen) our overall response in several respects.

Perhaps someone will think to contrast our example of Tolkien with someone who imagines and pens a particularly graphic or pornographic narrative, suggesting that material of sufficient depravity does provide warrant for inferring the moral character

substitution instances aside from God and the world, the skeptic has not provided independent support for it. Instead, they have merely restated the conclusion they need to prove in slightly different terms. Thus, the reformulated argument, like its predecessor, remains question-begging.

[19]We can now look back at Sterba's formulation to see a similar issue. In one of his Requirements, Sterba specifies rational beings, but if his formulation specifies, as it must to avoid breakdown across layers of reality, real as opposed to fictional or imaginary rational beings that are produced by a deep metaphysical cause, it too becomes question begging. Without such specifications it is not obviously true as absolute but in fact rejectable on inductive grounds.

[20]This point is made by James Ross in *Philosophical Theology, 271.*

[21]Our claim is not that there cannot be any moral obligations from a higher plane of reality to a causally dependent created layer. Rather, our claim is that it is the atheologian's burden to establish a linking premise and there simply cannot be any good warrant to suppose that there are such obligations. Any proposals are either drawn from horizontal causal relations and applied by bad analogies or they beg the question, as we have suggested above.

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of the one imagining the story. Presumably, as being themselves depraved. Call this the Wholesomeness Objection.

Let us grant, for the sake of this objection, that the moral character of, say, an author, can be inferred from the plotline of their narrative. For instance, some have suggested that George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* describes a morally ambiguous world in which gratuitous sex and evil are prevalent and described in some detail. Does this suggest that Martin is less saintly than Tolkien? Perhaps. Certainly, the works of E.L James or the Marquis de Sade make a better case for inferring the moral ineptitude of the author from their work.

We argue, however, that the evils inherent in Tolkien's works are just as wicked as those in Martin's or any others. Sauron is terrible. Mordor is hell on Middle-Earth! The issue is not the existence of evil in the world, but way in which it is attended to and the intent of the author to illicit passions in the reader. And that is a relationship between the author's composed narrative and the reader, which is on the same layer of reality.

God's mode of knowing is not attending to creation in the same way an author attends *affectually* to aspects of his story. Contemporary proposals that God empathetically experiences reality from the subjective vantage point of all or some of his creatures are simply incompatible with God's impassibility and so not relevant to our analysis here.[22] This is relevant since it is only because of the mode of attending that one might assume a depraved mind is behind a depraved narrative, for the simple reason that they enjoy attending to depravity. But since the mode of attendance does not apply to God, the comparison would be quite ineffectual. Classical theists deny that God attends to the world in any manner like Tolkien or Georg R.R. Martin attend to their narratives, so this account will not suffice or will itself result in begging the question by once again anthropomorphizing God (particularly God's mode of knowing). For, what is attention other than a kind of focused observation. While God knows particulars, lowly things, and even evils, God does not direct attention on evils and lowly things in a focused or disproportionate manner as compared to the whole.

Tolkien's world has horrific elements, but the world, *per se*, is not attended to in a gratuitous manner. One could imagine a depraved Tolkien could have attended to his story through a narrative that focuses on the gore, violence, and sex which is left unstated but assumed in the background of the world he built. Were a character aware of such evils, and attending to them, perhaps the character would assume the author of that world was depraved, but that assumes the very perspective Tolkien did not have when imagining Middle-Earth. *A fortiori*, the God of classical theism cannot be attending to evil in a depraved manner, since that would require a change of attention in God in which some aspect of his infinite knowledge is attended in a higher degree than the rest. This is simply not possible in a god of pure actuality.

Now, one might say that we must attend to the depravity of this world, and so God subjects us to horror in the way Martin, James, or de Sade inflict depravity on their readers. However, this is where the analogy breaks down. These authors can force the perspective and attention of the reader through the narrative in a way that God does not. Indeed, one may, within this creation, attend to the wickedness of this world so as to seek a voyeuristic thrill, or to focus upon those evils as a hero who seeks to remedy

[22] See James E. Dolezal, 'Defending Divine Impassibility', in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, ed. by Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (London: Routledge, 2023),

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the evil. In effect, God gives us the world, but the narrative about that world is of our own making.

6. Moral collapse

There is one final concern that we should briefly like to highlight and to make some preliminary suggestions about: the concern of moral collapse. If what we have said in this article is correct, then do not all our concepts of morality break down in relation to God? Do we lose all ability to form reasonable exceptions of God, particularly with respect to how God will treat us? Do we not lose our grip on the moral dimension entirely?

The answer to the latter question is, we think, obviously not. Even if our knowledge of good and bad, right and wrong, as it applies to us, does not univocally apply to God, that is of little consequence for our daily lives, because *it still applies to us* and we can still have knowledge of such things – in fact, we do. So, that concern is not so much a serious one and can be set aside.

The more interesting question is related to the character of God. We say God is good, perfectly good, but has this notion become meaningless considering our analysis? Well, no, at least not under a traditional analogical notion of goodness. To say, for example, that something is good is – again, traditionally speaking – just to say it is adequately or sufficiently actualized *as the kind of thing it is* (given the convertibility thesis of being and goodness, another commitment of classical theists). A good tree is something that sinks deep roots and grows branches and leaves, or something like that. A good human being is something that actualizes its *species-specifying potency* – namely, its reasoning ability – and acts rationally in relation to relevant facts concerning human nature, etc.

As certainly broadly Thomistic and Aristotelian philosophers have emphasized, 'good' functions primarily as an attributive, not predicative, adjective. This means that 'good' does not denote some specific property or quality in the same way that 'blue' might describe the color of my bathrobe. Rather, 'good' modifies a noun directly and thus cannot be understood in isolation from the thing it describes. For example, to say 'there is a good one in my hand' doesn't tell us much, but it does tell us something: namely, that there must be something which is sufficiently actualized along the relevant dimensions of its kind.[23] Now, that doesn't tell us whether that something is sharp (which we expect a good knife to be), or rational (as we expect a good human to be), or four-legged (which we expect a good dog to be), since whether those are good-making features of something depends entirely on the sort of something that is in the box. So, our notion of goodness is not rendered meaningless in relation to God, even if it is not informative either, a hat-tip to the apophatic elements of classical theism. We can know God is perfectly good, insofar as God is purely actual and so is not the sort of thing that features privations.

The question, then, of whether we can have any expectations of God relates to the question of how well we can understand the sort of thing God is. Everything acts according to its nature, and God has a nature – is identical to his nature, as classical theists maintain. If we believe we can have certain insights into the nature of God –

[23]Here we are just following Peter Geach, 'Good and Evil', *Analysis* 17(2) (1956), 33–42.

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philosophically, we take it – then perhaps we can begin to generate (at least broad) expectations of the sort of world God might create and how God might govern that world, if one can argue those expectations must be the case to be consistent with the nature of God (this is not to say God has moral obligations; only that God, like everything else, has constraints, if only logical).

If one is more apophatic or agnostic about discerning insights about the divine nature, then perhaps this cannot be done, and we must have recourse toward presumed divine revelation to tell us something about the moral character of God.

We leave such matters open for future inquiry.

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